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AUTHOR Kesner, John E.
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between the security of preschool children's attachment relationship to their parents and how they negotiated and managed hypothetical conflict with peers. Participating were 66 preschool-age children recruited from child care facilities and residing in a large urban area in the southeastern United States. The sample had an average age of 57 months, was predominantly African American, and represented a wide range of socioeconomic status (SES) groups; 45 percent of the sample came from single-parent homes. Children completed the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) and a Conflict Story Completion Task (CSCT), both requiring the child to complete a story begun by the researcher. The ASCT responses were scored on a 4-point scale of security of attachment. The subjects' problem-solving strategy and resolution to the hypothetical conflict on the CSCT were scored for constructiveness. Results indicated that conflict strategy and resolutions were positively related to attachment security and negatively related to SES. Security of attachment was related to the child's age and gender. Results of multiple regression analyses indicated that attachment security and SES predicted conflict strategy. Significant predictors of conflict resolution included attachment security and single-parent family status. As predicted, attachment security was a unique predictor of the child's choice of conflict strategy and resolution to hypothetical conflict stories. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/KB)

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Conflict Management in Children's Play: The Role of Parent-Child Attachment

John E. Kesner, Ph.D.*

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*John E. Kesner, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in Early Childhood Education at Georgia State University

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Conflict Management in Children's Play: The Role of Parent-Child Attachments

By far the majority of social exchanges that occur between children occur during play. However, this is also the most likely time for conflicts to arise. Recent research suggests that the majority of conflicts children face are either unresolved or resolved in destructive ways (Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, Ward, & Acikgoz, 1994). How children learn to manage and resolve conflicts in childhood can have far-reaching implications for their future social interactions affecting not only their physical and psychological health, but their entire family's health as well. Recently, Bowlby's attachment theory has been utilized as a framework for understanding how intimate relationships in early childhood influence a child's social competence in and out of the home.

Research using Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) Attachment Theory has shown that parent-child attachment relationships are predictive of social functioning and conflict management. That is, children who were classified as securely attached to their parents are more socially competent with peers and adults. In two studies, Waters, Wippman and Sroufe (1979) found that secure attachment classification in infancy was positively related to smiling, vocalizing, sharing of toys at 18 months, and Q-sort assessments of social competence at three and one-half years. Pastor (1981) found that securely attached children (20-23 months) were more sociable toward peers and adults. Insecurely attached children were more negative toward peers and adults and overall more stressed.

There appear to be gender difference in the effects of insecure attachment. Fagot and Kavanagh (1990) found that teachers rated girls who were insecure/avoidant in attachment as having more difficulties with peers and in general more difficult to deal with. Cohn (1990) also found gender differences in 6 year-olds. Cohn found that boys, but not girls, who were insecurely attached were more aggressive, less well liked by peers, and rated by teachers as less socially competent than securely attached children. Additionally, Turner (1991) found gender differences in the relationships between insecure attachment and social competence. Turner found that insecure boys were more aggressive, disruptive, assertive, and controlling than secure children. Girls who were insecure were rated as having more dependent behavior and more positive expressive behavior. These insecure girls were less assertive that secure children.

The positive effects of secure attachments on social competence extend into the management and resolution of conflicts among older children as well. Wartner, Grossman, Fremmer-Bombik, and Suess (1994) found that children who were securely attached at age six had more constructive conflict resolution and in general showed fewer behavior problems than those who were insecurely attached. These securely attached children were also more likely to attribute less hostility in a social perception test than those who were insecurely attached.

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between the security of children's attachment relationship to their parents and how they negotiate and manage conflicts. We hypothesized that the security of the attachment relationship would be a unique predictor of conflict strategy and resolution in preschool children. That is, security of attachment to parents would uniquely predict conflict strategies and resolution in a model that includes salient demographic factors, including child's age, single parent family status, SES and gender.

Methods

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 66 preschool-aged children residing in a large urban area in the southeastern United States. Forty-four percent of the sample was male and 56% were female, ranging in age from 44 to 70 months, with an average age of 57 months. The sample was predominantly African American (71%), with 17% Hispanic, 9% Caucasian, and the remainder other races (3%), with a wide range of SES groups represented in a fairly normal distribution. Forty-five percent of the sample came from single parent homes and the average family size of the sample was four.

Procedure

Children for this study were recruited from several large child care facilities in the area. Parents were contacted and asked for their participation in a study on how children's relationship with significant adult caregivers influences their social behavior in a childcare setting. Children participated in two story completion tasks. The first was the Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) developed by Bretherton, Ridgeway, and

Cassidy (1990). Following the ASCT an additional Conflict Story Completion Task (CSCT) (Kesner, 1996) was administered to the child. Extensive written notes were taken during the procedure as video and/or audio taping of the children was forbidden by the child care facilities. The instruments are discussed below:

Attachment Story Completion Task (ASCT) The ASCT (Bretherton, Ridgeway, and Cassidy, 1990) is a projective measure designed to assess the security of the parent-child attachment relationship. It comprises five stories that tap into significant attachment issues. The tester told and acted out the five stories allowing the child to complete each story at predesignated spots in each story. Testers prompted the subjects by asking them "tell me and show me what happens next." Additional prompts were used to help clarify the child's story (e.g., who did what, when and to whom). Subjects' responses were scored from a four point scale ranging from (1) insecure to (4) secure. The tester, following careful examination of written transcripts, made an initial rating of the subjects' responses. This was followed by the identical examination of another trained rater who also scored the story. Disagreements were settled by the principal researcher. Inter-rater reliability for the attachment story completion task was .81.

Conflict Story Completion Task (CSCT) The CSCT is a modified Attachment Story Completion Task with two stories focusing on conflicts that may occur between children. The administration for the CSCT is identical to that of the ASCT. The first story of the CSCT dealt with control of resources and preferences and the second story dealt with values, beliefs, and the nature of the relationship. Children were given two prompts with regards to the completion of each story, (a) "how will the boy/girl solve this problem?" to ascertain the strategy that the child felt would best solve this problem, and (b) "how will the story end?"in order to find out how the child felt this problem would be resolved.

The subject's strategy was scored on a five point scale. Scores ranged from least constructive to most constructive. The subject's resolution to the hypothetical conflict was scored on an eight-point scale. Again, scores ranged from least constructive to most constructive. In addition, strategy and resolution scores on the two stories were combined to produce a total strategy and resolution score. Testers scored these stories following an identical procedure as the attachment story completion tasks. Inter-rater reliability for the conflict story

completion task was .83.

Story Completion Task Methodology:

The two story completion tasks utilized the same methodology of requiring children to complete stories begun by the researcher. Because this shared methodology could confound the results, analyses were performed that demonstrated a lack of interdependence between the two sets of story completion scores.

Results

To evaluate the effect of the shared methodology, two analyses were performed. First a factor analyses was carried out for all story completion variables. All attachment and conflict scores loaded on separate factors. Second, canonical correlation analyses between the two sets of story completion variables revealed no significant relationships. Univariate correlations indicated that conflict strategies and resolutions were correlated with demographic and attachment relationship variables. Conflict strategy and resolution were significantly correlated to the security of the attachment relationship with the parents $r = .55$, $p < .001$; and $r = .55$, $p < .001$ respectively). Conflict strategy and resolution were also related to SES $r = -.31$, $p < .05$; and $r = -.26$, $p < .05$ respectively). Security in the attachment relationship to parents was significantly related to the child's age $r = .31$, $p < .05$), and gender (Spearman rho $= -.31$, $p > .05$).

Hypothesis Testing

Two simultaneous multiple regressions were carried out to determine the relative predictive ability of the selected independent variables. Two regression models were created and tested. Each included the demographic variables of SES, gender, single parent family status, and the attachment security variable as independent variables with conflict strategy and resolution as dependent variables respectively.

Results of the multiple regression with conflict strategy as the dependent variable yielded a significant model ($F = 6.8$, $p < .001$). The R of .53 indicated that this model accounted for 29% of the variance in predicting conflict strategy. Significant predictors of conflict strategy were security of attachment and SES ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$; $\beta = -.21$, $p < .05$ respectively). Stepwise regression with the same variables revealed that attachment security was the first variable to enter the model ($\beta = .46$, $p < .001$). SES was the second and only

other variable to enter this model (β = -.21, $p < .05$).

Additionally, multiple regression with conflict resolution as the dependent variable yielded a significant model (F= 8.2, $p < .001$) as well. The R of this model at .57 indicated that this model accounted for 33% of the variance in predicting conflict resolution. Significant predictors of conflict resolution included security of attachment (β = .44, $p < .001$), and single parent family status (β = .27, $p < .01$). Stepwise regression of the previous model indicated once again that attachment security with parent entered the model first (β = .44, $p <$ .001) followed by single parent family status (β = .28, $p < .01$).

Discussion

As predicted, attachment security was a unique predictor of the child's choice of conflict strategy and resolution to hypothetical conflict stories. Univariate analyses revealed several significant relationships between conflict strategy and resolution and certain demographic variables. However, when the attachment relationship with parents was taken into consideration, it became the best predictor of conflict strategy and resolution.

Thus, these data suggest that it is important to look beyond univariate relationships in determining what will influence children's conflict management strategies. Based on these findings it appears that the quality of the relationship between a child and his/her parents influences the child's conflict management skills. Low SES, and single parent family status, are generally believed to put children at risk for higher levels of conflict (Kupersmidt, Griesler, DeRosier, Patterson, & Davis 1995), and although they were unique predictors of conflict management the best predictor was the security of the attachment relationship between children and parents Further, this study illustrates that regardless of SES and single parent status, children that can form secure relationships to their parent (s) as neither of these variables were related to attachment security.

Early childhood relationships provide a foundation for future social development by providing a model of relationships upon which the child builds. Thus, the models formed in childhood can affect intimate relationships for a lifetime. For example insecure attachment has been linked to adult male intimate violence and general marital instability (Kesner, Julian, & McKenry 1997; Mayseless 1991).

There are some methodological difficulties in this study which limit its generalizability. First, the sample size of sixty-six limits the strength of the statistical analyses. Second, children were not chosen at random and it is possible that only parents who had reasonably positive relationships with their children agreed to participate. However, a strength of this research is the inclusion of a large number of African American and Hispanic children of all SES backgrounds, both of which are usually under-represented in research. Future research with a larger, random and equally diverse sample would strengthen the validity of these findings. Additionally, future research should include more measures of family life, and measure real-life conflicts that children face.

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